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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 000386

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: VP ON CURRENT POLITICS

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CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR HOWARD F. JETER. REASON 1.5(d).

1. (C) Summary: Nigeria's Vice President claims his earlier flirtation with running for President was a ruse to distract IBB. According to Atiku, the ambitious former military ruler is now effectively sidelined for 2003. Buhari's base in the North is narrower than most observers believe, Atiku says, asserting that he and President Obasanjo will win handily. Clearly pleased with his pivotal role in securing Obasanjo's renomination, Atiku looks forward to 2007. Obasanjo still faces a credibility gap. End Summary.
2. (SBU) Vice President Atiku Abubakar February 7 invited DCM for communal lunch after Juma'at prayers and then for a brief private meeting afterward. Atiku was in excellent spirits and remarked that his health had improved.
3. (C) Agreeing that his own actions had been critical to the success of the Obasanjo/Atiku ticket at the early January PDP convention (refs), Atiku reviewed events from his perspective. He had gone to sleep on Friday night, January 3, when Obasanjo returned from an unsuccessful visit to the Bauchi delegation and awakened his number two. The angry delegates had "sent the President packing," and Obasanjo needed Atiku's support to salvage the ticket. Violating security regulations in the interest of showing unity, they drove from rebel delegation to rebel delegation together in one car.
4. (C) "I had to pity the man," Atiku said. Over and over, delegates said they would vote for Obasanjo because Atiku requested them to and despite their anger over Obasanjo's failure to keep his promises. The Governors also had to be "brought along," Atiku continued. They wanted firm assurances (from Atiku) that Obasanjo would "behave differently next time [in the 2003-2007 term]" than he had heretofore.
5. (C) Atiku felt IBB was significantly diminished in the wake of the PDP convention (reftels). "At the last minute," IBB had called Governor Kure to tell him the Niger delegation should not vote for Obasanjo and Atiku. Kure declined to follow his patron's guidance, saying Niger had committed itself and would not renege. IBB's initiatives during this electoral cycle were focused on sowing confusion and holding Atiku down, so that the road would be clear for an IBB win in 2007, Atiku opined; the former military ruler fears Atiku will be "too powerful" by 2007 if he holds onto the Vice Presidency for another four years. IBB's failure to have a significant impact on the PDP's candidate selection process this year will further weaken him in the run-up to 2007, Atiku added.
6. (C) Atiku asserted that he had been "leading them along" for seven months, planning all along to stick with Obasanjo but allowing Obasanjo's adversaries to think they might be divided. By the time they discovered that Obasanjo and Atiku were staying together, it was too late for Babangida, Aliyu Mohammed and others to implement a back-up plan.
7. (C) Atiku said many PDP stalwarts, especially Governors, pushed him to announce a bid for the Presidential nomination during the first 36 hours of the convention. He had told them he could not abandon Obasanjo because doing so would split the country. "In the end, I am a patriot, and I cannot do that."
8. (C) While agreeing with DCM's assessment that the ultimate result of the convention and his role in achieving it had boosted his profile in a political arena where appearances play a key role, Atiku contended that this did not help him. "I want to be underestimated; that is how I get things done."

19. (C) Atiku assessed ANPP Presidential candidate Muhammadu Buhari's chances as slim. The retired general and former Head of State has no base outside the Northwest and, therefore, cannot win. Atiku said he was "blackmailing" politicians and businessmen from that zone with this "fact," pushing them to return to the PDP so that the Northwest might contribute to Obasanjo's victory rather than having to live with the inevitable despite their best efforts to prevent it.

19. (C) COMMENT: If Atiku truly was "leading them along" for seven months, then he is an actor of extraordinary skill and breadth who played deftly nuanced performances before Obasanjo allies, Obasanjo adversaries and foreign observers alike. We agree, however, that he benefited from being underestimated, particularly vis-a-vis Babangida. As concerns that former Head of State, Atiku's assessment of Babangida's diminution accords generally with our own. The "Maradonna" of Nigerian politics appears increasingly desperate to remain relevant - or at least to make the general public think he is. Having failed to control the PDP convention from his Minna mansion, he recently told the media that he had been "born again" and now supported the idea of a sovereign national conference: Anything to keep the ball in play. As for Buhari, his base of strength may be just as narrow as Atiku describes. His hopes for victory rest, therefore, almost entirely on being able to exploit fully Obasanjo's loss of political credibility and popularity. Thus far, however, his close advisors (all true believers) seem to think that voters will flock to Buhari simply because he is not Obasanjo (and from the North) and apparently do not perceive a need to present a positive agenda. So far, Buhari's Presidential campaign has been dormant.
JETER